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# The Workshop

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## THE NATURALISTIC ELEMENT IN ORNAMENTATION. \*)

By JACOB FALKE.

It was perhaps here that ancient art took a direction most widely opposed to naturalism, though the new epoch of refinement which succeeded the antique was by no means favorable to this direction, and soon put an end to it. While Christianity considered nature as bad in principle and opposed to its spirit, Christian art took at first a different view; but the more it became in course of time synonymous with the ecclesiastical, the more did it necessarily depart from the natural, and limit itself to the use of the conventional motives of the Græco-roman ornamentation. To these it adhered closely, and the Byzantine style may clearly be recognised as the connecting link between the two.

The principle however of Byzantinism was a different one. As an essentially religious and symbolic art it returned to the Egyptian style, but with this difference, that it had to deal not with the first natural types, but with those which deviated from them very widely, and in all forms, whether architectonic or ornamental, to look not at the forms themselves, but at the meaning which somewhat arbitrarily was hidden beneath them. Both plants and animals were but symbols, expressions of an idea which if connected at all with their form, were only so connected by a far-fetched allegory. As then everything in Byzantine art was by rule, the artist was never free to choose the number of dented leaves or points of the acanthus; whether there were to be three, four or five was not decided by the due distribution in the given space, but by the emblematic significance, which by ecclesiastical convention was united

with them, whether the Trinity, the four Evangelists, or the five sacred Wound-prints, or anything else was to be symbolised.

This symbolical ornamentation almost entirely excluded all attention to that beauty and charm which are the peculiar object of decorative art, and robbed the style of all artistic liberty, changing it into a stiff formality which we may consider as the very opposite to naturalism, since here every influence of nature disappears, both in her accidents and regularities. While the naturalist is a slave to nature, the Byzantine artist is in equally servile dependence on symbol. He brings anti-naturalism to the very freezing point, his style is benumbed, the freedom of art, nay art itself has attained its deathstroke.

Notwithstanding this torpidity which could but increase in the local and religious restraints of mediæval Greece, two other styles of art, the Arabo-Moorish and the Romanesque arose out of the Byzantine. It was just the new art of the nationalities which had escaped from barbarism, and were aiming at civilisation, and which met with Byzantine art and structure perfectly elaborated, and fell naturally under its influence. But if they took from its conventional forms of ornament the commencement of their own decoration, they soon found themselves compelled again to free themselves from the chains of a cold ornamentation, the restraints of which their fresh and vigorous life could not long endure. Aiming at a freedom and at the same time a greater richness of forms, they were obliged, as it were, to endeavor to obtain a hold on nature, and to return to this eternal source of forms of art. This did not indeed

\*) See pag. 1 ante.  
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take place in the two styles at once or in the same way, since the nations who took part in the cultivation of the new styles brought to it their own characteristic peculiarities, and their own peculiar taste.

When the Arabians attained a position in the world, they had scarcely any peculiar art forms but the simplest surface ornament, suggested by textile art. The barrenness of their land presented them with no luxuriant plants, but born as they were under a burning sky they were susceptible of the glow and richness of colors, and indeed delighted in them. Wherever they came as conquerors, they met with the traces of Grecian art, though for the most part marked by Byzantine stiffness, which however was sufficiently capable of a certain magnificence, as may be seen in their mosaics on golden ground. This influence is undoubtedly seen in their first buildings and earliest ornaments, and here again it is the acanthus leaf which, preserving still its beauty, is brought into a new form. But this time there is no approach to the natural type, but rather a complete emancipation from it, so much so that in the Arabian execution no connexion with the Byzantine new model would be discovered, if the transitional phases were not pointed out. In the Byzantine acanthus leaf, the outlines had sharp corners and points, and the surfaces were covered with deep channels in the direction of the points, instead of showing the veins in relief. Both motives were taken up by the Arabian artists and so elaborated that at last the resulting configuration resembled more a feather than a leaf. Still further did they treat this feathered ornament after a manner peculiar to themselves, amplifying it into whole arabesques, uniting it with geometrical figures, and with these confusedly mingling all kinds of artistic and intricate patterns. The surfaces were now covered with it, and instead of any plastic finish a rich coloring was added.

No trace whatever occurred here of organic nature, unless we take into account the general ornamental law of the Arabians, which always brought back its ornaments of branches and tendrils to a parent stem, or rather showed them proceeding from it, in order to fill up the given surfaces regularly with plants. Scarcely however can it be said that the Arabian artists derived this law from nature itself.

This style of art did not remain stationary here, but, notwithstanding its original direction, it again, after the lapse of some centuries, submitted to the influences of nature. This seems especially to have been the case, in the two extreme regions, to the west in the Spanish peninsula, and to the east in Persia and India, while in the centre, the Mahometan tribes subject to the Turkish sceptre adhered longer to a mere conventional arabesque style, and are still thereby distinguished from the floral ornamentation of further Asia. Of this Asiatic floral style which is of later origin and still in full play, we shall

have to speak further on. As to the Arabo-Moorish style, its renewed adoption of natural types is very limited, but examples in which new plant motives are distributed on geometrical or wreathed arabesques are of frequent occurrence in the Alhambra. The silk stuffs which proceeded out of the Moorish or Arabian factories, mostly of Egyptian make, may also be mentioned here. They are certainly highly conventionalised, always drawn flat and in regular repetition, but the motives are new and of natural origin and not found in earlier styles of art. We may remark also that in the course of time they approach nearer and nearer to the natural types, till in the fourteenth century they reach in this respect their highest point. From this period however Arabian art gradually died out in the west and was supplanted by the Christian, while now for the first time India and Persia seem to continue the approach to natural types which the west had begun, and in the next century to have brought it to a high point of perfection.

The second great style which sprang from Byzantine art was the Romanesque, the peculiar creations of which were not however only influenced by the character of the western nations, but had special ornamental motives which passed over from the style of the German and Celtic peoples into that of the Romanesque. We allude here on the one hand to those peculiar intricate convolutions executed with such perfection of art, which reached their highest point in the illuminations of the Irish and Anglosaxon monks; on the other hand to the fantastic element of the North or Scandinavian ornamentation which finds its expression chiefly in the frequent employment of dragon-like animals. These elements combined with the ornamental remains of ancient Byzantine art, the acanthus, palm leaf etc., which in the tenth century have surprisingly antique forms, make with them a highly remarkable mixture of ornamental motives on which the advance of the Romanesque period most strongly imprints its own character.

This advance, which accompanied the expansion and the most flourishing period of the middle ages, is simply due to the Crusades, to the age of Chivalry and to the brilliancy of feudal life, to minstrels' songs and heroic poetry, in the best epoch of Germanic Christian spirit. Thus it comprised beauty, fancy, romance, poetry and an elevated piety, all of which found expression in art. We meet indeed with all this again in the Romanesque, and frequently we see united in its ornamentation, richness, beauty and fancy not altogether free from symbolism.

Although there was here a constant aspiration after a richer development and therefore a need of new motives, there was no approach to the types of nature. New motives from the vegetable kingdom were necessarily adopted, and a more extensive use than formerly of the animal world; but whatever was so adopted was

immediately transformed in a peculiar manner, and woven into bold and frequently magnificent involutions according to the free fancy of the artist's humour. Even the animal forms were not unchanged, but subjected entirely to his creative taste, conventionalised, denaturalised, just as was the case with the plants. Lions, dogs, eagles etc., were recognisable as what they professed to represent, but yet materially different from their natural types.

In the course of the twelfth century the ornamentation of the Romanesque style developed itself in its own peculiar fashion even into greater richness, but with the thirteenth century, when the transition to the Gothic took place, it again returns to the direction of a nearer approach to the types of nature, just as was the case in the Arabo-Moorish art, only in a more decided and thorough manner. This direction of taste follows the march of civilisation and finds its foundation in it.

At this period Chivalry descended from its ideal height, and in its stead arose the civism of towns, and with it a more sober spirit which laughed at the extravagance which preceded it. Together with the religious feeling, all respect for the church and the clergy gradually fell into disuse, and gave place to a worldliness of thought and life, and too often to absolute frivolity. The church had persecuted nature, had decried it as altogether evil, the new ideas had turned to it again making a stand against extravagance and fantasy wherever they were to be found, and therefore also in the department of Art.

The new style ignored all the fancy of the Romanesque ornamentation, as well as its symbolism. The Gothic entirely discarded both, having in view no other object than a simple ornamentation of its subject, and this she accomplished after her own fashion, at first quite in a legitimate process, but afterwards by degrees in a bolder and a more intelligent method, in proportion as a pure mannerism and formality entered into the characteristics of the style.

The principle upon which the transition style and the Gothic returned to natural types was, as we have said, at first a very proper one. The conventional leaf and plant ornament, as adopted from the Antique into the Romanesque was entirely discarded. The Gothic artist restricted himself to his local surroundings, and took from them the motives of his ornaments. The leaves and branches of indigenous plants, the oak, vine, hop, trefoil, ivy, thistle, rose etc., were employed for ornament in stone, wood, metal and painting. With these were decorated the capitals in his churches and castles, the relics and ecclesiastical vessels, and even his domestic articles of furniture. But he did not copy the leaves of these plants just as he found them in external nature with all the accidents and irregularities of their shape accruing from weather, soil and position. As the Egyp-

tians had formerly done, he observed, but with more individual insight into the species, the law of finding the general in the particular. He studied the type of the plants, their artistic characteristics, their peculiar life, as seen in their shape, the lines of their interior formation and their plastic movement. Contrary to the practice of the Grecian artist who treated the leaf only in its contour as a flat surface, he noticed how the leaves were modelled, how they moved and wound themselves, how they clung to, or shrank from one another, how they attached themselves firmly to their branches, or swung and waved on their slender stems. On such observation he built his creations which were especially suited for plastic execution. While moreover he still distributed and arranged the leaves with a certain regularity and proportion, yet without their producing, on the capital, for example, the effect of a mechanical addition, but rather as appearing to grow out of the stem, the Gothic artist, in all his approaches to nature is far from being its slave or a mere naturalistic copyist.

But in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries mannerism obtained the upper hand in the Gothic style and made its influence felt in the ornamentation and configuration of the foliage. The addition of the leaf ornament to the capital, or to whatever architectural member it was to decorate, became in fact mechanical, the leaf having all the appearance not of growing out of the stem, but of being added afterwards. More important still was the alteration which took place in the formation of the leaf itself. The observation of plastic life had led to the bulging out of the leaf in the middle to give it a greater appearance of movement, and this was afterwards introduced as an inevitable process whether the material were stone, iron, silver or wood, and whether the ornament was intended for an architectural work, an article of furniture, a door or any thing else. We see everywhere these bosses or knobs creeping like snakes or caterpillars on the gables, on the curled floriated finials, on the iron-work of chests and doors, and everywhere it is rather a deterioration than an improvement, and this dry uniformity entirely destroyed the creative genius of the earlier Gothic with its abundance of plant ornaments. Then in the second half of the fifteenth century there was added to this treatment of the foliage the frequent employment of dead branches which were placed in curves, against one another, or intertwined with one another, or bent in spiral shape, and made the Gothic ornament, which had been at first so fresh, original, and of happy design, so much the more tedious as its other constituent part, the now everywhere employed tracery had outdone this foliage ornament in insipidity.

In this way we see the Gothic again departing from nature and giving itself over to a conventional formalism which would soon have strayed into Byzantinism but that

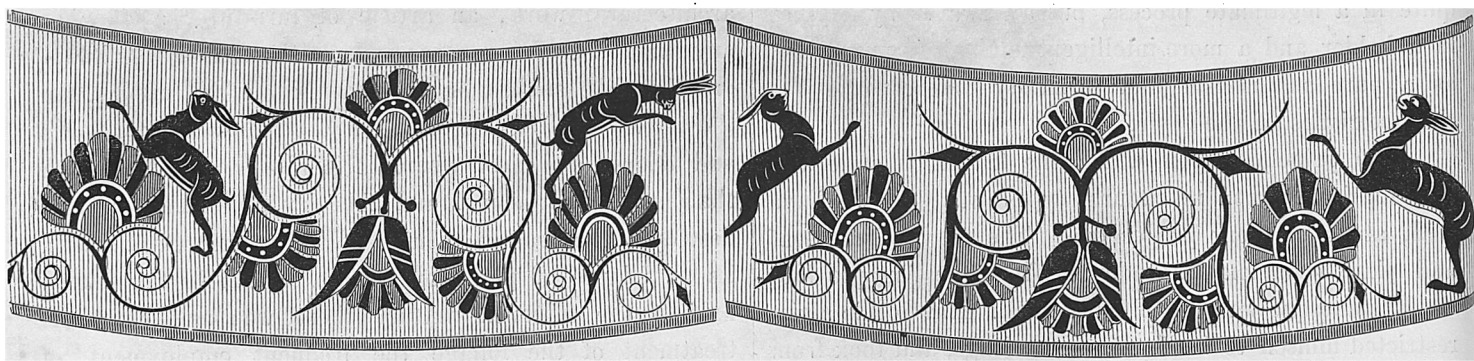
this was speedily drawing to its end. Before, however this came in, naturalism played an important part in one branch of the ornamental art of the period. We allude to the parchment arabesques, which during the epoch of the Gothic style had taken a somewhat independent development. It had so far followed the general tendency that it entirely freed itself from the fantastic motives of the Romanesque, the convolutions and last traces of antique ornamentation, and far more than the Romanesque made the vegetable kingdom the peculiar element of the arabesque, though by no means exclusively; hence, however, it had shown the same leaning towards nature as the architectural foliage of the transition in early Gothic, but had so conventionalised the motives which it took up in the freest manner with the changing taste of the time, that the natural type was very seldom to be recognised.

A change came in however with the fifteenth century, when a more conventional and a decided naturalistic tendency went hand in hand. The principal element of the former, which also rests on plant motives, is a tendril and foliage composition descending in swinging branches and leaves through the whole of the side of the folios, and disclosing elegant flowers in the midst of the spiral-shaped stems. This style is seen also in the sixteenth century, but with alterations which denote the

epoch, and in which is already at times introduced the naturalism bent which attains its full expression in the second style of treatment. This is mostly represented in miniature manuscripts, such as missals and the like, on the borders of which are all possible flowers and fruits, twigs with leaves and buds in the most delicate imitation of nature, and placed apparently in so fortuitous a manner, that no artistic hand seems anywhere to have governed their disposition; often too is conventional foliage intermixed with natural, conventional leaves spring from naturalised branches, and naturalised foliage develops into conventional. On both the natural and conventional, sit and flutter little birds, butterflies, beetles and other insects, with the naturalistic execution in miniature. But what points to the highest naturalism is that these objects are so painted as to cast their shadows on the parchment, and even sometimes these shadows are detached from the butterflies, so that they seem to be hovering over the parchment. In such crude juxtapositions, in the union of such decided contradictions, we recognise a period of decay or transition. Mediæval art declines, and the spirit of the Renaissance rises that is to find its models in Italy.

*(The conclusion in our next.)*

## SPECIMENS OF ORNAMENTATION.



Nos. 1 and 2. Antique Vase Ornaments in the Pinacothek Munich.